

**Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee
Public Hearing September 26, 2013**

Dear Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the study you are conducting which will focus on funding levels for the State Parks and Forest System and will assess whether those levels adequately support operational needs.

My name is Eileen Grant. I am the President of the Friends of CT. State Parks, a coalition of 23 individual statewide Friends groups with overall membership of 6900 members, all of whom are volunteers. We provide monetary assistance, sponsor educational programming, advocate for increased resources and contribute over 79,000 volunteer hours annually to enhance visitor experience in our parks. These donated hours are valued at \$2.2 million per annum and are equivalent to the hours worked by 41 full time employees. In addition to labor, Friends groups, since their inceptions, have given a further \$8+ million in cash and goods to improve conditions in our severely underfunded System.

Despite decades of Friends' substantive efforts, the state of state parks only grows worse yearly. Unfortunately, the State has not realistically supported its facilities for 30 years and continues not to make the investments necessary to keep parks, a critical tourism network, well-maintained, safe and fully open for the families of Connecticut.

The most critical problem for the State Parks Division is its minimal number of full time field positions. At present, only 74 field staff members (16 park supervisors and 58 maintainers) are available to manage and maintain 107 parks and service the needs of 8 million annual visitors. This fiscal year, 15 of these 74 workers will be eligible to retire, conceivably bringing staff strength to 59 in the next fiscal cycle, one third the level of forty years ago. In 1971, park lands were half their present acreage, parks' 450 buildings were in dramatically better repair, general infrastructure was sound, and park visitors were fewer in number. Four decades ago, park field staff numbered 185.

The Clough Harbour Study, a thorough and impartial analysis of the Park System's manpower requirements and capital needs, was commissioned by the Legislature in 2003. That study recommended levels of 205 full time field staff and 1900 seasonal workers.

The ratio of full time field employee to visitor is already an untenable one worker per 108,000 patrons. With the looming retirements, that ratio will become 1 worker per 135,000 visitors. This level of coverage would never be tolerated in the private sector. By means of comparison to another Connecticut tourism network member- Mystic Seaport employs 195 full-time and 95 part time employees (plus a separate sizable seasonal work crew). Mystic Seaport hosts just 300,000 visitors vs. parks' 8 million.

Not only are the numbers of park workers abysmally low, but the average age of the workforce in place is very high for the type of punishing work required in the field. For many years there have been virtually no opportunities for career advancement as positions have progressively disappeared and been defunded; aging maintainers in their forties and fifties remain fixed in place, performing the same duties as those when they began their careers as seasonal workers. As a result of being unable to hire adequate numbers of staff for decades, the Park System has only a handful of workers in their twenties and early thirties; older workers have few youthful reinforcements to share the toughest labor. The Park System has almost no people in the pipeline to replace our few highly skilled Park Supervisors, all of whom will retire within 15 years. The bulk of our present pool of maintainers will also be at or near retirement. They are not likely to be our future Park Supervisors unless desperately needed managers' positions are immediately restored, and vacating maintainers' positions are allowed to be backfilled with talented candidates from the seasonal ranks.

A precipitous decline in staff numbers has been matched by a sharp escalation in park problems. Deferred maintenance is an issue in nearly every park. Mainstay buildings are falling into disrepair; unique historic structures are crumbling; roads and parking lots are below standard. Vandalism and theft are rising dramatically. An increasing percentage of patrons engage in dangerous behaviors; incidents of misconduct are inadequately addressed by staff because the size of the geographic area

for which each manager is responsible has grown exponentially. It is physically impossible for Park Supervisors to police their units.

Without an immediate influx of personnel, there will be no choice, but to close some parks and campgrounds entirely and convert others to "walk-ins" removing picnic tables, shuttering bathrooms, and stopping trash pick-ups. There are simply not enough staff to give visitors an acceptable measure of comfort, cleanliness, safety or protection in every facility, let alone provide the enhanced education and sporting programs that families strongly desire. Connecticut's priceless natural resources can no longer be preserved without the presence of adequate human resources to sustain them.

The State Parks System contributes \$1 billion and 9000 jobs annually to Connecticut's economy. For every dollar invested in parks, \$38 is returned to state coffers. An entity so obviously beneficial to the State financially needs to be reinforced, not weakened. If parks are to retain future value to local and regional economies, and bolster the state tourism network, they must be properly staffed and funded. The relative condition of park properties directly affects those who surround our facilities. For community businesses to most prosper, parks must strive to look their best so that they may function as attractive hubs for vibrant activity. Just as a well-maintained and fully operational network stimulates growth, a poorly repaired and partially functioning one depresses expansion.

Benefit is proportionate to investment. With more realistic monetary support from government, the Parks and Forest System can add far more than the \$1.25 billion it already stimulates.

Superb recreational opportunities in our forests and parks really distinguish our State. A small but dedicated staff, a large network of supporting volunteer Friends, and ordinary citizens over multiple generations have worked so steadfastly to keep the Park and Forest System alive and thriving. The System truly deserves your support as well.

The Friends of CT. State Parks are very pleased that you have chosen to study conditions and needs in parks. We believe that close examination will reveal just how critical the situation is throughout the System and hopefully spur the prompt actions necessary to save this worthy institution so treasured by Connecticut citizens.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant
President, Friends of Connecticut State Parks
c/o 43 Neptune Ave. Madison, CT 06443